

A Forum on Electronic Journals: Change, Challenge, Opportunity

Part Two: E-Journals and the Seminary Library Context: A Response to Jeffrey Garrett's "Wood, Flour, Journal: How the Electronic Turn Has Affected the Way Journals are Found, Used, and Read"

by Beth M. Sheppard

Information professionals talk about the "information transfer cycle"—the life stages, as it were, of any book, journal article, or text. The cycle includes the creation of material (authorship, publication), its dissemination (marketing, sales), organization (indexing, cataloging), diffusion (making available to users), utilization (by readers/researchers), preservation (long-term storage), and ultimately its destruction.¹ I would like to commend Jeff for his very insightful paper and its incredible range. Indeed, through the course of his exposition he addresses, at least in passing, virtually every aspect of the information transfer cycle and clearly demonstrates that the mode in which information is produced, whether it be in electronic format or print, doesn't essentially alter the fact that information still passes through these same phases. He included insights garnered from the information creation stage with his experiences with *Bookbird*, discussed distribution of e-content via aggregators and indexers, highlighted digital storage on platforms and archives such as JSTOR, and even gave an anecdote about the destruction of digital information when an editorial team of *Bookbird* required the removal of digital content from ProQuest. Sadly, I am not well read in, nor do I have experience with, the fragility of digital information and its destruction, about which I would be very interested in learning more, should my colleagues have the opportunity to address that in our discussions today. But, I would like to provide an additional thought or two regarding the "usage" and "creation" portions of the cycle as they relate to digital materials and theological scholarship.

Let's take the issue of utilization first. Jeff mentioned some very intriguing details about how reading behaviors sometimes change in a digital environment as "users dip into and back out of (an article . . .) like the electronic intruders they are or have become" (p. 9). Lest this ring in our ears as some sort of condemnation of the digital age, I want to affirm that it is the culmination of a long process within the technology of the book. Indeed, reading habits began to tend in this direction, I'd hazard to guess, when the codex replaced the scroll in the first centuries CE. Certainly the scroll itself was limited in terms of the number of words that might be included in a single "publication." Bruce Metzger, for instance, observes that the Gospel of Luke was, in terms of word count, at the outer edges of possible length.² When longer works became feasible with the codex, and readers could flip pages to refer back to or forward toward information easily, reading habits changed. With the advent of the printing press where standardized page numbers were the norm, subject/author/Bible verse indexes provided yet another avenue whereby some readers might begin to dip into texts to read only selected bits and bobs, sometimes unsuccessfully running aground on the craggy reefs of misrepresenting an author or misattributing an idea which was presented in the context of a fuller exposition. So, again, this reading behavior is not new. In Biblical Studies we even have

¹ Roger C. Greer, "Information Transfer: A Conceptual Model for Librarianship, Information Science, and Information Management." In *Intellectual Foundations for Information Professionals*, H. K. Achleitner, ed. (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

² Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5-6.

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names for it—*eisegesis* and proof texting. The digital era has merely provided a means for those who wish to engage in this type of reading to do so more efficiently than with past generations.

In addition to users dipping into texts, which may or may not be worrisome, I have been long pondering the sometimes widely held assumption that researchers in the humanities prefer paper over digital content. While it is true that the publishers in the sciences were pioneers with converting journal material to digital formats and as a result there has been much more documentation on the usage of e-content from the sciences than in the humanities, subsequent studies³ and even my own anecdotal observations of the periodical room at the United Library in Evanston have convinced me that this divide is no longer as deep as one might imagine. The faculty members of Seabury-Western and Garrett-Evangelical Seminaries, for instance, are publishing; doctoral students are writing dissertations; and master's students are cranking out term papers—despite the fact that the paper journal collection is rarely used. It is unlikely that patrons are instead buying their own journal subscriptions to make up the difference. To be sure, statistics have shown that scholars carried personal subscriptions to about six periodicals in the nineteen seventies but now on average only maintain two.⁴ So where are our patrons getting their resources? Although the United Library's usage statistics for electronic resources are not disaggregated from those of our larger academic neighbor to the immediate East of our campus due to shared license agreements, I can only conclude that our patrons have voted, by their use, for electronic formats. Since patrons are making their preferences clear, the publisher who does not respond will find the works of the authors he/she represents increasingly marginalized from the broader stream of scholarly reading and dialogue.

Before leaving the topic of the utilization stage a few more brief comments are in order. Certainly there are additional overarching implications for users of digital formats on reading habits beyond the propensity to “dip” and sample. For instance, according to James Evans, contrary to expectations that scholars would take advantage of hyperlinks and explore in interdisciplinary fashion, researchers are instead becoming ever narrower in their reading.⁵ Leisurely browsing has, in essence, been replaced by focused queries for specific information. Value judgments need not be made about this new turn. After all, there has never been much resolution on parallel issues within the larger educational project such as whether or not liberal arts models of education (browsing) are more superior to professional models (subject focused). Both have much to commend them. And I would hazard a guess to say the important point for a journal publisher is not whether readers are cherry picking single articles or perusing entire issues, or both, but that the content is indeed being used. In any event, despite the fact that readers are confining their research to ever more specific points, Carol Tenopir has produced statistics that show that since the advent of electronic formats, scholars now read more material than they had done in the era of paper. They also spend less time per individual article than they did in a print-only age.⁶ But the question of how to capture

³ Erin T. Smith, “Changes in Faculty Reading Behaviors: The Impact of Electronic Journals on the University of Georgia,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29, no. 3 (May 2003): 162-168. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6W50-48NHX7J-4&_user=10&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&view=c&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=9d06c8aa0a1d8c9e38abeaf3022f31a2

⁴ Carol Tenopir, “How Electronic Journals are Changing Scholarly Reading Patterns,” <http://www.stpi.org.tw/fdb/tr/2006/04-Tenopir.ppt>

⁵ <http://blogpublic.lib.msu.edu/index.php/2008/08/29/are-online-databases-and-journals-changi?blog=10>

⁶ Tenopir observes that humanities professors read on average 146 articles/year at 37 minutes/article—in comparison with an average of 252/year and 34 minutes each across disciplines, but in comparison with 1977 they were only reading 150 on average in 48/article. <http://www.stpi.org.tw/fdb/tr/2006/04-Tenopir.ppt>

this reading market which is reading “more” “subject specific material” in “less time” due to electronic formats is one that speaks to the “information creation” stage of the cycle to which I will now turn.

There are many advantages of a digital publication over paper for an academic audience besides the immediacy of availability, portability, and the ability to search in a more focused manner. As one of the section editors of a newborn digital publication, *Theological Librarianship*, I have found the digital platform that we are using to be quite exciting. There are three points that should be highlighted. First, producing digital content is not something new and can be done very inexpensively. Thus, publishers thinking to break into this format need not reinvent the wheel. At *Theological Librarianship*, for instance, the platform we are using is an open-source freeware provided by Open Journal Systems (OJS).⁷ With the free software being hosted on an already owned ATLA server and the journal running on volunteer labor, there are virtually no pre-production or post-production costs.⁸ This has meant that our e-content may be offered free of charge. In essence, with regard to cost of production to return ratios, what is returned “is not money, but impact and reputation.”⁹

A second advantage to the e-format besides the widespread support network of those who have already embarked on digital versions involves the tracking devices within the journal software. These provide data that will allow publishers to customize the content for an audience. If we find, at *Theological Librarianship*, for instance, that a section of the journal is not being read, we will be able to easily remove that column or department from subsequent issues. The platform software eliminates the need for user surveys and/or elaborate citation tracking studies.¹⁰ Being freed from the constraints of paper formats in regard to layout, design, and length is yet a third advantage of a born-digital publication. In the electronic realm, limits on length disappear as one is no longer required to consider weight and postage costs. Thus, individual issues might be longer or shorter as available content dictates, reducing the time between submission and when an item appears. It is also easier to produce supplementary issues, alerting registered “subscribers” to the additional content by pressing a single button to send e-mail notification that includes links to the contents. Along these same lines, the potentiality for publishing beyond text within a digital environment is stimulating. There will come a day in the not too distant future, I predict, when electronic journals will include embedded media files. Imagine an article on church music, for instance, that includes samples of music tracks; or a review of a passion play that features a clip of the performance. With a born-digital publication, the potential for experimentation amongst information creators is almost limitless.

While targeting content to an audience and providing innovative layout and multimedia may attract readers, the success of a journal online is dependent on a few additional features. For instance, it should be indexed in “all the usual places,” and that is where the full text ought to be placed. While building one’s own platform to control subscription fees may be attractive, be warned. Scholars like the convenience provided by the aggregators, and some readers will not be likely to search out e-publications that are outliers produced only on their own stand-alone sites. Also, reputation for a journal exists beyond the format. Start-up journals often struggle to obtain content

⁷ The software and more information is available at <http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ojs>.

⁸ The journal has a budget of just a few thousand dollars which goes primarily toward marketing since this new journal does not have an established reputation or readership.

⁹ David W. Lewis, “A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century,” *College and Research Libraries* 65, no. 5 (Summer 2007): 426.

¹⁰ See for instance the citation tracking type of study executed by Stephen P. Harter, “The Impact of Electronic Journals on Scholarly Communication: A Citation Analysis,” *The Public-Access Computer Systems Review* 7, no. 5 (1996). <http://epress.lib.uh.edu/pr/v7/n5/hart7n5.html>.

because they have no track record and are not indexed (indexers like ATLA require two years of publication to ensure sustainability of a publication before indexing). By contrast, a long-established publication with copious back files, rigorous editorial processes, and a peer review system should make the transition from paper to digital smoothly.

That being said, I wish the editorial board of the *Anglican Theological Review* much success as it explores this new option and wish to thank both Newland Smith for inviting me to participate in this panel and Jeff for a very wonderful paper with which we kicked off this discussion.

